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ABSTRACT

A disproportionately high number of minority students are referred by general education teachers for placement in special education. Teacher perception of social skills and problem behaviors of African American male students with and without identified disabling conditions was studied with 44 African American urban male students in grades 3, 4, and 5. They represented three placement designations: (1) mainstreamed learning disabled; (2) mainstreamed emotionally disturbed; and (3) general education nondisabled. Twenty-two general education teachers who were homeroom teachers for a special education and a general education student participated. Data were gathered through examiner interviews of student participants and teacher ratings of at least two of their students, one in special education and one in general education. A series of t-tests ($p<0.05$) and a correlation were calculated along with supplemental analyses to address the research questions. There was no significant difference in teacher ratings of nondisabled and emotionally disturbed students in either social skills or problem behaviors. While there were significant differences in teacher ratings of social skills of nondisabled versus learning disabled students, no significant differences were found when teachers rated nondisabled versus learning disabled students on problem behaviors. In addition, there were no significant relationships when comparing teacher versus student ratings of social skills across the three groups. Findings are discussed in relation to the literature on teacher perceptions of African American males. The usefulness of the Social Skills Rating System (F. Gresham and S. Elliott, 1990) for this population is also discussed. (Contains 2 tables and 22 references.) (SLD)

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE SOCIAL SKILLS: STUDENTS WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES

ED 426 155

By

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Abstract

In spite of the safeguards in legislation, there remains a concern with lack of explanation, about the disproportionately high number of minority students referred by general education teachers and subsequently placed in special education. The purpose of this investigation is to examine teacher perception of social skills and problem behaviors of African American male students with and without identified disabling conditions. Forty-four African American male students from third, fourth, and fifth grades were the student participants and they represented three placement designations mainstreamed learning disabled, mainstreamed emotionally disturbed or general education non-disabled. There were 22 general education teacher participants who were homeroom teachers for a special education and a general education student participant in the mainstream classroom. Data were gathered through examiner interviews of student participants and teacher ratings of a minimum of two of their student participants (one special education student and one general education student).

A series of t-tests ($p<.05$) and a correlation were calculated along with supplemental analyses to address the research questions. There was not a significant difference in teacher ratings of LD vs. ED students in either social skills or problem behaviors. While there were significant

differences in teacher ratings of social skills of ND vs. LD students, no significant differences were found when teachers rated ND vs. LD students on problem behaviors. Additionally, there were no significant relationships when comparing teacher vs. student ratings of social skills across groups (ND, ED or LD). The findings were discussed in reference to the literature on the perceptions held of African American males. Additionally, the utility of the Social Skills Rating System for this pooulation was discussed.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE SOCIAL SKILLS
:STUDENTS WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES

Over the last several decades there has been a concern that African American students with disabilities are over represented in Special Education placement without these students meeting the criteria of a handicapping condition as defined by the law (Ysseldyke, Algozzine and Thurlow, 1992). This has been found to be particularly true of African Americans who are male and perceived to have a behavioral or discipline problem (Harry and Anderson, 1994). For example, in their analysis of national data, Harry and Anderson (1994) found that African American male students' special education placement was well over 10% of their representation in the population. They were overrepresented as a whole (69%) and particularly in Learning Disabled (LD) (73%) and Emotionally Disturbed (ED) (76%). It is conceivable that teachers perceive minority students, particularly African American males, as being more aggressive and generally lacking acceptable characteristics, social skills, or behavior to be successful in student/teacher interactions (Willis, 1989). While there are a number of studies documenting the nature and impact of

students' social skills, there has been little attention in the social skills research on specifically African American male students (Gresham and MacMillan, 1997).

According to Gresham (1983) social skills may be conceptualized as part of a broader construct known as social competence. Social competence includes both social skills and adaptive behavior competencies (Gresham, 1983); these skills include interpersonal functioning and social acceptances.

Gresham, Elliott and Black (1987) have argued that social skill deficits in children could lead to short and long term negative consequences of a social emotional nature. Social skills deficits in students also have been correlated with bad conduct discharges from military service, school maladjustment, juvenile delinquency, and adult mental health difficulties as evidenced in psychiatric referrals up to 13 years later (Gresham, et. al., 1987).

The significance of social skills development in the educational system has long been recognized (Dusek, 1985; Gresham, et. al., 1987). It has been suggested that the behavioral characteristics of African American male students conflict with what is expected of students in school systems (Sigmon, 1990); however, few studies have focused on African American male students and special class placement. Deutsch (1967) noted 30 years ago that African American male

children's aggressive behavior is more threatening than African American female children. More recently, the behavior of African American male students has been observed and analyzed by Majors and Billson (1992). They provide a conceptualization of "cool posing" as a way to describe how behavior can be misinterpreted by those in authority. Specifically, Majors and Billson (1992) suggest that the "expressive" lifestyle displayed by African American males is threatening, considered aggressive and is intimidating. For those reasons, they assert, African American male children are suspended more frequently and for longer periods of time, and are more likely to be assigned to remedial courses and classes for the children who are retarded and learning disabled.

The relationship between the teacher and the student is important in the educational process. There is a need for and lack of research directly examining teacher perception of social skills and/or problem behaviors of identified disabled and general education non-disabled African American male students. The purpose of this study is to examine teacher perception of social skills and problem behaviors of African American male students with and without identified disabling conditions.

Methodology

Participants

Forty-four African American male students from third, fourth, and fifth grades were the student participants. The special education student participants were mainstreamed. For this study, mainstreamed is defined as those students with learning disabilities or emotional disturbance who attend at least one general education academic class per day as required by their Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). The student participants ranged in age from 7 to 11 and they had one of three placement designations: (a) mainstreamed learning disabled (LD), (b) mainstreamed emotionally disturbed (ED), or (c) general education non-disabled (ND) students. There were 12 students in the LD group, 10 students in the ED group and 22 students in the ND group. All students were from urban central Texas. All students were participants of the free or reduced lunch program. The general education homeroom teachers verified student participation in the lunch program.

Students in the special education group were selected on the basis of two criteria: (a) their eligibility for, and placement in special education services for either learning disabilities or emotional disturbance; and (b)

their attendance in at least one general education academic class per day as required by their Individual Educational Program (IEP).

The ND group consisted of 22 African American male students who were not eligible for special education services, did not receive instruction in special education services and did not meet the district criteria for any categorical or remedial program (i.e., Title 1, Bilingual/ESL, or gifted and talented). Each special education student (LD and ED) was matched, on age and grade placement, with a ND student in their general education class. A list of the ND students who met the above criteria was generated by their teachers then, a random numbers table was used to select the students.

Each of the homeroom teachers for the LD and ED student participation groups was invited to participate in this study as raters of one of their ND and one of their special education (LD or ED) students. There were 22 teacher participants. The average years of teaching experience of the teacher participants was 10 years with the range from 1 to 25 years. Fifty-five percent (11) of the teacher participants were Anglo, 30 percent (6) were African American, 15 percent (3) were Hispanic, and two participants did not indicate ethnicity.

Permission letters with a brief description of the study and a statement of confidentiality were sent home to the parents of the selected special education and general education students. All parents granted permission for their child to participate in the study.

Instrumentation

To measure social skills development, the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) (Gresham & Elliott, 1990), both the Elementary Teacher and Elementary Student form of the instrument, was administered to teachers and students respectively. Each form will be discussed separately.

SSRS-T (Teacher Form). The SSRS-T (teacher form) is a 57-item teacher rating scale designed to assess social skills in three domains of social skills, problem behaviors, and academic competence. Each SSRS-T took approximately 20 minutes to complete. For the social skills and problem behavior domains, teachers were to rate student behavior according to how often it occurred (0 = never, 1 = sometimes, and 2 = very often). Sample statements are as follows:

1. Controls temper in conflict situations with peers.
2. Invites others to join in activities.
3. Gets angry easily.
4. Is easily distracted.

For the academic competence domain, teachers rated items on a 5-point scale (1 = lowest or least favorable performance of the class, 5 = highest or most favorable performance, compared with other students in the classroom). The rater was to circle the number that best represented their judgment. Sample items below.

1. Compared with other children in my classroom, the overall academic performance of this child is:

2. This child's overall motivation to succeed academically is:

3. Compared with other children in my classroom, this child's overall classroom behavior is:

Coefficient alpha is a correlational index of internal consistency ranging from 0 (no consistency) to 1 (perfect consistency) (Hays, 1988). The internal consistency estimates for the SSRS-T ranged from .85 to .94 for social skills across subscales, from .77 to .89 for problem behaviors and were .95 for academic competence (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). These coefficients indicate a relatively high degree of scale homogeneity. The SSRS-T test-retest reliability has been assessed with samples of teachers, from the elementary standardization sample rating the same students four weeks after their original standardization

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ratings (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). The results indicated stability in teacher ratings with test-retest correlations of .85 for social skills, .84 for problem behavior, and .93 for academic competence (Gresham & Elliott, 1990).

Gresham and Reschley (1987) examined the relationship between SSRS-T and the Social Behavior Assessment (SBA). Teachers rated 79 elementary-age students using the SSRS-T and the SBA. The correlations were -.68 for social skills, .55 for problem behaviors, and -.67 for academic competence. The social skills scale and the academic competence scale were inversely associated with all problems on the SBA, while the problem behaviors scale was directly associated with all problems. Gresham and Elliott (1990) considered these findings to be consistent with theoretical expectations. They concluded these two measures are measuring similar constructs and support the criterion validity for elementary-age students.

SSRS-S (Student Form). Each student in the sample was interviewed by the examiner with the Social Skills Rating System, Student form (SSRS-S) instrument (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). The SSRS-S has one domain, social skills with 4 subscales: cooperation, assertion, self-control, and empathy. This scale, has 34 items. The students were asked to respond to each item by thinking about themselves and indicating the frequency of the stated behavior (0 = never,

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1 = sometimes, and 2 = very often). Some sample statements from the SSRS-S follow.

1. I start conversations with classmates.

2. I keep my desk clean and neat.

3. I use a nice tone of voice in classroom discussions.

Each student interview lasted approximately 15 minutes. All interviews were conducted on the respective student's campus, during the school day.

The internal consistency estimates for the SSRS-S is .83 for the social skills total and from .53 to .74 for the domain subscales (i.e., .68 cooperation, .53 assertion, .74 empathy, and .65 self-control) (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). This indicates a relatively mild degree of scale homogeneity.

A validity study was conducted using national standardization data to investigate the criterion-related validity of the SSRS-S form. The relationship between the SSRS-S and the Child Behavior Checklist-Youth Self-Report Form (YSR) was investigated. The YSR is designed for students between 11 and 18 years of age and measures Externalizing Syndromes, Internalizing Syndromes, and Total Behavior Problems. It also yields a Total Social Competence score and scores for subscales within the Social Competence

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domains of Activities, Social Functioning, and School Functioning. Both validity and reliability have previously been demonstrated for the YSR (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1987). There were low but significant correlations between two (.36 Cooperation and .27 Assertion) of the four SSRS-S subscales scores and the YSR total Social Competence scores. What these findings suggest is that an inverse relationship exists between the SSRS-S and the YSR Externalizing and Internalizing Syndrome scores.

Research Design and Data Analysis

The social skills of African American male students with and without identified behavioral problems were explored by using a Quasi-experimental design. For the purposes of this study, social skills served as the dependent variable. This variable was operationally defined by teacher and student ratings of social skills on the SSRS-T and SSRS-S instruments respectively.

Correspondingly, student placement (mainstreamed LD, ED or general education) was the independent variable and defined by the student's actual school placement and diagnostic label. The following research questions were tested using statistical procedural programs from the Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (Hays, 1988). Due to the limited information available on regular education teacher's perception of African American disabled

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and non-disabled male students and the exploratory nature of this study, there was greater emphasis placed on Type II error than Type I error. Consequently, alpha levels were retained at .05 even though multiple t-tests were conducted which enhances the probability of experiment-wise error. The research questions were:

1. Does the General Education teacher perception of students' social skills and problem behaviors differ for African American male students without a disability and those African American male students with emotional disturbances?
2. Does the General Education teacher perception of students' social skills and problem behaviors differ for African American male students without a disability when compared to those African American male students with learning disabilities?
3. What is the relationship of student self-perception of social skills and teachers' perception of student social skills for non-disabled, learning disabled and emotionally disturbed?

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Results

Teacher Perception of Social Skills

A t-test for independent samples revealed that there was not a significant difference ($df=19$, $t=.27$, $p < .05$) in teacher perception of social skills in African American male students who were ND as compared to those African American male students classified as ED. These results suggest that general education teachers do not rate African American male students differently regardless of whether the student is ND or classified as ED (See Table 1). However, the result of a t-test comparing teacher perception of African American male social skills of ND and LD students revealed a significant difference in mean scores ($df=22$, $t=2.95$, $p < .05$). These results suggest that teachers rate African American male student with LD lower than ND African American male students on social skills (see Table 2).

Supplemental Analysis. Data from the teachers ratings of African American student social skills was compared to the normed sample data (Gresham & Elliott, 1990), using a t-test the comparison revealed that the sample mean scores were significantly different from the population mean score for the ND and LD comparison groups ($df=22$, $t=4.91$, $p<.05$). However, no significant differences were found when

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comparing population mean score data and the ED sample mean data (df=9, t=1.35, p<.05).

Teacher Perception of Problem Behavior

T-tests revealed no significant differences between groups in reference to teacher's ratings of African American male students' problem behaviors. That is, there was no difference when comparing ND with ED African American male students and when comparing ND with LD African American male student groups in teacher's rating of problem behaviors(see Tables 1 and 2).

Supplemental Analysis. The norm sample data from the teachers' ratings of student problem behaviors (Gresham & Elliott, 1990) was compared to problem behavior ratings for this study's sample. The t-test revealed that the sample mean scores were significantly different from the norm sample groups (ND, ED and LD). For the ND group, the results were (df=21, t= -4.12, p<.05). The ED group findings were as follows (df=9, t= -5.62, p<.05). Finally, the LD group data were as follows (df=11, t= -4.54, p<.05).

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Relationship of Teacher Perception vs. Student Perception of Social Skills

Correlations between teachers' perception of African American male students' social skills and African American male students' self perception of social skills were not significant for any of the student types (ND, ED or LD).

Discussion

Social Skills and Special Education Placement

While this study's small sample size is a limitation, some useful information has been provided by this study and can be the basis for future explorations of African American male student referral and placement in special education. Gresham, Elliott & Black (1987) have argued the importance of social skills for successful mainstream classroom interaction with classmates and teacher. .Previous literature (Gresham, 1992; Gresham & Elliott, 1989; Gresham, Elliott & Black, 1987; Merrell, Johnson, Merz & Ring, 1992) has highlighted the deficient levels of social skills and problem behaviors of mildly disabled LD and ED students when compared to their non-disabled peers. In those earlier studies, the SSRS Teacher form successfully discriminated the non-disabled from the disabled students in social skills and problem behaviors. However, in this study, when general

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education teachers were asked to use the SSRS to rate the levels of social skills and problem behaviors of a group of mildly disabled African American male students in comparison to a control group of non-disabled African American male students, few differences were found. Specifically, teacher social skills ratings were not different for a ND sample of African American males when compared with a sample of African American males with ED.

In contrast, teachers rated the social skills of the LD group lower than the matched sample of GE African American males. Interestingly, when the mean for the SSRS norm sample was compared to the social skills ratings for LD and ND African American students, there were significant differences. It is suggested that the norm sample used to develop standards for the SSRS Teacher form - social skills subscale is different from the sample pool rated in this study. The question of instrument validity is repeated with analyses of additional findings from this study.

It is not certain from this study whether teacher perceptions were based on harbored stereotypes of African Americans. However, it is interesting that both students labeled as LD and the ND sample received significantly lower than average (i.e. a score of 100 is average) social skills ratings by their teachers. Perhaps, their ratings were

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based on harbored stereotypes which were strengthened when the student was labeled (Prieto and Zucker, 1980).

Student Perception of Social Skills

In this study, there was not a significant relationship between student and teacher perception of social skills. While this reported lack of relationship could be due to small sample size, it also may reflect a difference in student and teacher perception of social skills. Comer (1988), for example, writes about the importance of bridging the communication gap between school and home as a way toward improved student achievement. The finding that teachers' ratings did not relate to students rating themselves could be representative of such a communication /culture gap between the teacher and student. Teachers, in other words, have expectations that are not clearly communicated to students and the African American students do not satisfy the teacher's expectations, which as Comer (1988) suggests, creates interaction conflicts. Such conflict could relate, in part, to placing African American male students at-risk for referral and subsequent placement into special education.

Problem Behaviors and Special Education Placement

When disabled ED and LD African American male students were compared to a control group of non-disabled African American male students on teacher perception of their

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problem behaviors, no differences were found between the disabled and the non-disabled groups in teachers ratings of problem behaviors. These findings are quite different from earlier studies which clearly distinguished the disabled from the non-disabled; particularly, the ED from the non-disabled (Gresham and MacMillan, 1997). These findings may reflect general education teachers' perception of African American male students, regardless of disability status, as threatening, aggressive and intimidating. This is consistent with Majors and Billson (1992) observations. Perhaps the findings reflect a conflict African American male students present to school in that they are "different" from what is expected in school systems (Sigmon, 1990). It also may reflect the impact of student ethnicity teachers' attitude, perception, expectations and special education referral of their students (Dunn, 1968; Rist, 1979; Cosden, 1990 and Majors and Billson, 1992).

Another possibility is that the SSRS Teacher form is not an appropriate instrument for distinguishing disabled from non-disabled African American male students. While the SSRS was chosen because it was the best instrument available to assess teacher perception of social skills, it may not have been appropriate for assessing the social skills of African American male students. In support of this notion, all the sample subgroups including the NT African American

males were rated as evidencing more problem behaviors than the norm sample.

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Table 1

Mean, Standard Deviation and t for Non-Disabled vs Students with Emotional Disturbance on the Dependent Measures

Dependent Measures	**Student Groups**				
	Non-Disabled		*Emotional Disturbed*		*t*
	$\overline{X}$	SD	$\overline{X}$	SD	
Social Skills Ratings	94.50	12.41	92.70	17.07	.27 NS
Problem Behavior Ratings	109.20	11.16	116.70	9.39	1.63 NS

N = 20 (10 students per group)

Table 2

Mean, Standard Deviation and t for Non-Disabled vs. Learning Disable Students on the Dependent Measures.

Dependent Measures	**Student Groups**				
	Non-Disabled		*Learning Disabled*		*t*
	$\overline{X}$	SD	$\overline{X}$	SD	
Social Skills Ratings	95.91	8.73	83.58	11.56	*2.95 sig.
Problem Behavior Ratings	109.50	10.71	116.91	12.92	1.53 NS

**P<.05; N = 24 (12 students per group)*